

The Trinity in the New Testament (cont.); The Work of God: Creation

In discussing the trinity in the New Testament, we looked at the difficulties of studying the Holy Spirit and we looked at the personhood of the Holy Spirit. We now move on to looking at the deity of the Holy Spirit. The deity of the Holy Spirit is not as easily established as the deity of the Father or the deity of the Son. Millard Erickson is correct when he says, "It might well be said that the deity of the Father is simply assumed in Scripture, that of the Son is affirmed and argued, while that of the Spirit must be inferred from various indirect statements found in Scripture." Having said that, we can also add that sufficient evidence exists in the Bible to conclude that the Holy Spirit is not only a person but also a divine person. He is deity, and a person different from the Father and different from the Son, but also equal to the Father and the Son. And the question is, "What are the different lines of evidence for the deity of the Spirit?"

Various references to the Holy Spirit show an equivalence with God, even a kind of interchangeability, in such a way that saying 'Holy Spirit' is equivalent to saying 'God.' For example, in Acts 5 when Ananias and Sapphira withheld proceeds from the sale of a piece of property, Peter asked Ananias why Satan had filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. In the very next sentence, Peter asserts that Ananias has not lied to man, he has lied to God. Thus in Peter's mind, lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God. The second statement is an expansion or elaboration of the first, because it further identifies the person to whom Ananias has lied. Our second example is the body-as-temple texts in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. These two texts are to be taken together because they appear to be substantive parallels. In the first of these, the statement is about the temple of God. In the second, in chapter 6, the statement is about the temple of the Holy Spirit. So again, we have an equivalence, as far as Paul is concerned. To be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as in, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" is to be indwelt by God. Therefore, the Holy Spirit equals God.

Our second line of evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit possesses the attributes or characteristics of God. 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 says, "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God, for what person knows a man's thoughts except the Spirit of the Man which is in him. So also, no one comprehends the thoughts of God, except the Spirit of God." In other words, what God knows, the Spirit knows. The Spirit knows the things of God. We could also add John 16:3, which says, "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak and He will declare to you the things that are to come." In other words, the Spirit possesses all truth. This is really nothing other than what classically we have called omniscience. God possesses all truth. He knows all things that can be known. The Spirit knows all things that can be known.

The Spirit not only has the knowledge of God, He also has the power of God. Throughout the New Testament, the proclamation of a Gospel, and such acts as the performance of miracles, take place through the power of the Spirit. You might look at Romans 15:9. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the new birth takes place through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 19:16-25, we are told that regeneration does not take place by the power of man, but only by the power of God. Thus, the Spirit possesses power, capacities which only God has. The Spirit regenerates, and only God regenerates. What are we then saying? Synthetically, the Spirit is God.

Along with knowledge and power, we have eternity. Again, I am going to put two texts together. In Hebrews 9:14, Jesus offers Himself in death as a priestly sacrifice. He did that, according to the text, through the eternal Spirit. But if we go to Hebrews 1:10-12, we learn that only God is eternal. Now if

only God is eternal and the Spirit is eternal, then again synthetically, the Spirit is God. He possesses the eternity which properly belongs only to God.

A third line of evidence for the deity of the Spirit is that He performs work which is ascribed only to God. First, the Spirit is involved in the work of creation, as in Genesis 1:2, “the Spirit hovered upon the face of the waters.” In Psalm 104:30, He is involved with the ongoing cycle and renewal of life. Second, the Spirit gives the oracles of God, or we could say it this way: He is involved in the writing of Scripture. 2 Peter 1:21 says the biblical writers spoke from God as the Holy Spirit worked through them. Third, we can mention the Spirit’s work in human beings. Speaking about regeneration, we have already mentioned John 3 and Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus, but we could add Titus 3:5. God saved us by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Spirit. Again, the Spirit is the regenerator. We could also add that the Spirit is the sanctifier in 1 Peter 1:2. Quite simply, the Spirit gives the grace of God. The fourth point is resurrection. In Romans 8:11, Paul tells us that the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead and He will raise us up on the last day. Obviously, the Spirit is far more powerful than sin, than death, than the grave. He possesses powers and He engages in ministries that are appropriate for God.

Our last line of evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit is associated with the Father and the Son. We looked at this when we talked about the Spirit’s association with the Father and the Son in ways which only one like unto them could be so associated. In Matthew 28:19 the disciples are instructed to baptize in the three-fold name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is an implied equivalence there. There is an implied personhood of the Spirit as well. Second, in the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 the three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—give grace, love, and fellowship. Then third, all three have a part in salvation, as the Father foreloves, the Son cleanses, and the Spirit divides faith from faithlessness.

While the New Testament materials do not give us a nice, neat analytic statement about the trinity, they do seem to speak of three persons, three distinct, identifiable, even numerable persons. But we have more than simply three persons. We also have a connection between the three, a connection that goes far beyond a mere sympathetic moral or functional connection. We can even say that the three members of the trinity interpenetrate one another. Or to use language that we might be more familiar with, the three indwell one another. And this interpenetration is usually referred to under the term *perichoresis* in classical theology.

If you recall our discussion of the Arians, you may recall that they pointed out that Jesus often distinguished between Himself and the Father. Jesus said that the Father is greater than He is (John 14:28). And He said that His words are not His own but the words of the Father who sent Him (John 14:24). In short, there was a real stress placed upon the distinctiveness of person, or the consciousness of the Son apart from the Father. The Son was aware of being the Son rather than the Father. The Son should not be confused with the Father or the Spirit. One person can speak of the other as the other. That should be appreciated from the Arians, but it can be taken too far. It can be taken, as the Arians did, to deny the very deity of the Son, but it could be taken in the other direction. It could be taken all the way to tritheism: Each member of the Godhead is an autonomous god. Each is so fully God, each is so fully God in Himself, that He is a God without reference to the other two. It is this very problem that the doctrine of *perichoresis* is meant to address. In other words, *perichoresis* is meant to guard against tritheistic implications within trinitarianism. Now the term *perichoresis* arose in Eastern Orthodoxy, in such people as John of Damascus and pseudo-Ignasius. That does not suggest, however, that the term arose simply as a solution to a theological problem. There is ample evidence in Scripture for a doctrine of *perichoresis*. In other words, I am going to suggest that it is a biblical reality. In the Gospel of John, we clearly see that each of the three persons shares the life of the others, even that each lives in the other

two. I do not think we have any problem with the idea of indwelling, that God indwells the people of God. I think the doctrine of *perichoresis* is much like that. The Father indwells the Son and the Spirit, and the Spirit indwells the Father and the Son.

I think we have four ways of speaking of this interpenetration or indwelling. First, each of the three members of the trinity is equal to the other two. That is to say, each is as much God as the others, even though there is only one God. Second, each of them gladly submits to the others. I should qualify that a little bit. We do not see a clear submission of the Father to the Son or the Spirit, but we do see a clear submission of the Son to the Father and we see a submission of the Spirit to the Son and the Father. And we see this primarily in the whole notion of sending in John 14. As the Father has sent the Son, so the Son will send the Spirit. All three enjoy intimacy with the others. Fourth, there is a mutual deference between or among the persons.

Let me give you a couple of texts. We could spend all our time in the Gospel of John looking at these realities. In the very first verse, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” we see that the Father and the Son are equals. But we also see submission going on. Again, in John 1:14, we see a submission and we also see intimacy when John says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory of a unique Son, full of grace and truth.” And then verse 18 says, “No man has ever seen God but the unique Son (the *monogenes*, the one and only Son) has made Him known.” There is intimacy there. There is also a submission. There are also John chapters 14 and 17. In chapter 14, it is primarily the relationship between the Son and the Spirit in terms of submission and intimacy. And in chapter 17, it is the issue of the Son’s relationship to the Father. In chapter 17, Jesus speaks to the Father and chooses the Father’s will. Let us also look at John 3:34-35, which says, “For the one whom the Father has sent speaks the words of God.” The one being spoken of here is the Son. The Son is the One whom the Father has sent and He speaks the words of the Father. “For God gives the Spirit without limit; the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in His hands.” He goes on, “Whoever believes in the Son receive eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” Jesus is saying that how one responds to Him will bear fruit either in terms of the blessing or the curse of the Father.

Some might perceive a possible submission of the Father to the Spirit through the prophets. But the purpose of the prophets is to act as mouthpieces for the Spirit, whose own ministry is to proclaim the whole work of God. So if anything I think it would probably be the other way around. As we will see, there is a certain kind of historical submission that we will see.

What I would like to get to now is Calvin’s contribution. In Bray’s book he wants to suggest that John Calvin has some real contribution to make in terms of our understanding of the Holy Spirit. And I will do this here just by way of a couple of points. First is the relativization of the question of essence. I think Bray reads Calvin rightly when he claims that Calvin held that God may have an essence, but the revelatory base for that is rather slim. It is slim because the biblical concern lies elsewhere. The biblical concern lies in God’s person rather than essence. If you recall, we suggested that we may need the idea of essence somewhere. It was helpful at Nicea. It is helpful in talking about these three persons as relating by way of a shared, or a single *ousia*, a shared essence. But the biblical concern does not appear to lie with that oneness. It seems to be more concerned with communicating God as three persons. And that is where Calvin comes down as well. We should be very careful not to speculate too far beyond the biblical parameters about God. In fact, over against the rationalism of medieval scholasticism, Calvin continually stressed the limits of human rationality in thinking about God. And God always comes to us personally, in history, acting as a person in that history. There is no way to talk about God apart from His works, apart from His relationships.

The second point of Calvin's contribution is that all three members of the trinity are equal to one another in every respect. Calvin makes this point and Bray thinks that Calvin's contribution is because of the direction that the tradition had gone up to the time of Calvin. Both East and West tended toward a kind of monarchianism. The monarchians wanted to think in terms of the Father primarily as God. The West would tend to take this in the direction of modalism. They started with the Father and the Father becomes the Son and the Son becomes the Spirit. So you are still starting with the Father. The East would tend to think of it in terms of subordinationism, a kind of ontological subordinationism. The Father is God 'in and of Himself.' The Son is eternally begotten of the Father, so the Son is a generation of the Father's being. And the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Calvin's response is simply that he wants to see all three as *autotheos*. He wants to see all three as God in His own right. All three are co-equal in their divinity and united with each other. But listen at this point, it is not by sharing some impersonal essence but by their mutual fellowship and coinherence. In effect, then, what we have is a statement of *perichoresis*, interpenetration, or indwelling, at the level of person, not essence. What can you say about an essence, after all? Not a whole lot. Even the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Father and the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit, is a personal relationship, not an abstract one, not a purely formal relationship. We talk about the interrelationship among the trinity. What we see in Scripture, what we see in the Gospel of John in terms of their relationships are personal relationships. So again, we still do not have a kind of formal, abstract, philosophical discussion. We have a personal one.

Third, and here is where we start getting to the issue for many of us, the knowledge of one, whether it is the Father, the Son, or the Spirit, automatically involves the other two at the same time. Knowledge of the Father does not mean merely cognitive knowledge of God generally, but knowledge of God as person, knowledge of God through His works. The other way of getting at this is that we never have the Father without having the Son and without having the Spirit as well. If you get one, you get all three. If you know one, you know the other two. The Son so indwells the Father and the Spirit that if you know Jesus, you know the Father and you know the Spirit. The Father so indwells the Son and the Spirit that if you know the Father, you have the benefits of Christ, and you have the ministries of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin certainly up through his day and even into the modern period, did more work and thought more about the Holy Spirit than any other theologian in the history of the church. For Calvin, the Holy Spirit was the key. He did not just follow along. By indwelling the people of God, the Holy Spirit's job is to make known the Father as Father and the Son as Son. And when the Spirit does His job, when He applies the work of the Father, when He brings home and applies the work of the Son, He has in fact brought home and applied His own work and made Himself known as well. Each person is involved in each work of God. Creation is not merely the work of the Father. It is also the work of the Son and the Spirit. Yet there is a distinctive work of each, and creation is the distinctive work of the Father. As Bray puts it, there is even reason to preserve a certain kind of priority of the Father. But we will need to be careful here. When we talk about the priority of the Father, it should not be thought of as a kind of Origenist, and by that I mean Origen of Alexandria, ontological sense, in the sense that the Father is the source of all being, the Son is the eternally generated derived being of the Father, and the Spirit is the proceeding being of the Father. But what we do see is an historical redemptive priority to the Father. And the history of redemption is the key here. The Father does in fact send the Son. The Son does in fact promise that He will send the Spirit as His replacement (John 14 is the key text here). All of this suggests that God's attributes are the attributes of His person. Throughout our biblical discussion, God is a thoroughly personal and historical God who comes to us where we are. He comes to us in history. He comes to us in creation.

One might ask whether Calvin simply ignores the question of essence. I am not sure I would want to say he ignores it, but he certainly does not emphasize essence. Again, let us use Bray's argument. For Calvin, God may have an essence, but that is not the medium through which we understand God. We are going to know God through His persons, through His historical relationships. We may need something like an essence for thinking about the trinity, and it seems to me that Nicea was right when it did that, even though it was using extra-biblical language. It was trying to find some way to relate the three, to hold on to monotheism but to do justice to the threeness that we obviously see in the New Testament. So that is absolutely correct. We have three persons who are connected by this idea of *perichoresis*, so that they indwell one another and in that indwelling, there is a oneness. It seems to me that Calvin is suggesting that while we confess God is one, we really do not start there. We start with the fact that what we see in Scripture is the Son talking about the Father as another. The Son speaks about the Holy Spirit as someone other than Himself. Remember that it is God's job to figure out His own oneness. But He wants to come to us as three.

What about John 14:28 in which Jesus says, "My Father is greater than I?" I think that is a statement of submission, that in the history of redemption, the Father has the particular ministry of sending the Son and the Spirit to do His will. I think that makes the best sense of those kinds of statements. Remember you want to put that together with John 1:1, that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. We are going to find some way synthetically to put those kinds of statements together.

Let us turn our attention at this point to the doctrine of creation, or the work of creation. Let me make a few introductory comments. When Moses was led by God's Spirit to inscripturate revelation, the first word God wanted Israel in the wilderness to hear, the first word that God wanted His people to hear about Him is that He is the Creator. The revelation given about creation, creation both as God's original act and creation as the product of God's act, is not given, so that we primarily have a database concerning origins. It is given firstly so that we know God. It is given primarily that we know God. The creation, both as the original event, and as the nature of things, is revelatory of God. And this creative work of God plays a prominent role throughout the entirety of revelation.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." So opens the oldest of the church's ecumenical creeds. But what does it mean to confess God as the Creator? What is the relationship between God and the world to which this confession points? Our first point is that the creation of the world is an act of God. The universe is the result of a divine act of creativity. And within the biblical and Christian tradition, the world is a result of a free act of creativity, a non-necessary act on God's part. It is the result of God's will and it is the result of God's love. God is not driven to create. He is not forced by some sense of compulsion to bring the universe into existence. Nothing external to God, no forces outside of Him, lie behind the creative act. And no forces within God, no inner necessity, compels Him to create. If this was not the case, if some forces outside of God or some forces internal to God did stand behind the creation, then God's own existence would be thoroughly bound up with the created order in such a way that any real distinction between God and the material universe would be impossible. So first and foremost, when we talk about the doctrine of creation, we are talking about the Creator-creation distinction again.

One way of phrasing the classical presupposition of creation as a free act, has been to use the word, term, or phrase, *creatio ex nihilo*, 'creation out of nothing.' The intention of this phrase is really two-sided. The first is that it means to tell us that we need no principles, no powers outside of God, in order to explain the existence of the universe. Why does the universe exist? Because God made it. But secondly, the second thing that *creatio ex nihilo* tells us is that God created out of His love, out of His

will, not out of necessity. Again, the creation is a free act. We need to admit that we cannot neatly turn to a particular verse in Scripture and pull out a proof text for *creatio ex nihilo*. Romans 4:17 may come the closest. That text tells us that God calls into existence the things that do not exist. Thus that text may suggest that creation took place without any antecedent material cause outside of God. But the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* comes as much as anything from the overall flow, the overall tenor of the entirety of Scripture. God is the absolute monarch. Just as a king commands and his vassals do his bidding, so God exercise absolute lordship over all things. And of course, Genesis 1 comes to mind here. But you might also note Psalm 104. I have verse 7 in mind, but the entire psalm is about God as the creative Lord. In Genesis 1, we do not see *elohim* struggling with contrary powers. In Hebrew, it is very, very terse. It is four words. It is “be light was light.” By a simple executive order, God gives the command and there is immediate obedience to that command. He speaks and it is done. He creates by His mere word.

Creation is the work of the triune God. A large number of Old Testament references to the creative act attribute it simply to God, rather than Father, Son, and then Spirit. That makes sense, for the distinctions of the trinity had not yet been fully revealed. The Son had not yet been incarnated. The Spirit had not yet come at Pentecost as the replacement of the Son. When we turn to the New Testament, we do see differentiation, a differentiation that would leave a classical, theological tradition with this formula: the Father creates the world through the Son by the Spirit. First, it is the Father who fulfills the primary role in the act of creation. He constitutes the ground of all that exists. We are so used to that word ‘ground’ that we better be careful. It is ‘ground’ not in the sense of origin or source, but ‘ground’ in the sense of power. God the Father is the power source, not the material source. We will talk a bit more about that before we are done. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul tells us, “For us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things came and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things came, and through whom we live.”

But in what sense is the Father the source, the ultimate agent of creation? First, the Father’s will forms the foundation for the existence of all things. According to Revelation 4:11, the world exists by the will of the Father. Secondly, God’s manifested glory or presence is the goal of creation; the very purpose of creation is to glorify the Father. That is from Revelation 4:11 and Psalm 19:1. The Father is the source in the sense of being the Father. As a matter of fact, what we mean by source is just that, His fatherhood. As it is put in Acts 17:28, “For in Him we live and move and have our being.” We are His offspring in the same way that I am the source of my children. Or it is in an analogous way, because it is not literally the same. In an analogous way to my being the source of my children, the Father is the source of all things.

The Son’s role seems to be one of agency. Think of John 1:1-3 and 10, and Colossians 1:16-17. Verse 3 of John 1, for example, says, “Through him (meaning *logos*, the Son) all things were made, and without him nothing was made that has been made.” And Colossians 1:16 declares that all things were created by Him. Both texts employ the same Greek phrase, *di autou*, ‘through him,’ which speaks of agency. Through the Son, the Father creates the world.

Such texts as Genesis 1:3, Job 26:13, Job 33:4, Psalm 104:30, and Isaiah 40:12-13 suggest the Spirit is the divine power active in the creation of the universe. We have talked about the Father as the Creator and the Son as the agent of creation and the Spirit as the power of creation. That can all be a little confusing. There may be some conflict or confusion saying that the Father is the Creator and yet the triune God creates. But we ourselves speak about building projects, large projects, massive projects just this way. My house is not a big, massive project, but I could even speak about the building of my house just this way. Who actually built my house? If you ask the architect, he will say he built my house. He designed it and drew up the plans from the very beginning. If you ask the contractor, he will say he built

my house. He carried out the plan. Even though he does not do the actual construction, he will say he built it. And then there is a whole army of carpenters, roofers, bricklayers, painters, electricians, and guys that I do not know what they do, who will all say they built my house. We could add building material suppliers and lawyers. Finally, I could say I built my house. I signed, authorized, and paid for the house. That may not help get rid of the confusion but at least it gives us some insight into how we can speak of the Father as the Creator, the Son as the Creator, the Spirit as the Creator, and the triune God as the Creator.

As the Creator, God rightly enjoys a special status regarding the world He has made. As the Creator, God is the King over the things that He has made. He is the source of all authority. In fact, He is the ultimate authority. In a word, God is sovereign. He is the covenant Lord. He is the suzerain over His creation. Ultimately, this means that God alone has the prerogative to declare what creation should be. His will alone is the final norm throughout creation. Because He is the Creator, because He is the King, the Sovereign Lord, He is the Lawgiver for His creation. Because He is the Creator, He has the right to set down the law. Biblical authors employ quite a forceful analogy from the ancient cultural world to get at this, the analogy of the potter and the clay. Just as the potter has the right to do with the clay as he chooses, so also God has the right to act toward His creation in accordance with His will. This is seen in many texts including Jeremiah 18:1-6, Romans 9:1-21, Isaiah 29:15-16, Isaiah 45:9, and Isaiah 64:8.